

Book review

Human Medicine: Ethical Perspectives on New Medical Issues

James B Nelson (Pp 207; price \$3.95)
Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota. 1973.

This book is aptly named. The title *Human Medicine* is variously but consistently reflected in its eight chapters each of which examines the notion of human responsibility with reference to one of medicine's moral problems. In this way the author's aim of providing 'ethical perspectives on new medical issues' is worked out with reference to abortion, artificial insemination, experimentation, genetic research, dying, transplants and the delivery of medical care. To begin with, however, the context is stated: 'Caring for human health' is the first chapter title, and both here and throughout the book Professor Nelson stresses that the medical issues of our time can be coped with only insofar as attention is given to caring and to what should be meant by becoming human and healthy. Only in the last chapter does the book's American backcloth threaten to diminish its usefulness for the British reader, yet even here there are clear and useful parallels to be made.

Professor Nelson is a professor of christian ethics which means first that he is not a medical doctor and secondly that he adopts a christian stance in his handling of the complexities involved. Both these facts contribute to a good book, for if the author makes two general points well they are the negative one that medical technology and expertise alone are impotent in the sort of decision making which affects quality of life, and positively, that becoming human and moving in a direction which affirms our humanity is to be achieved only by reference to and conformity with a Christ-like pattern of living and dying, though this need not be overtly christian.

Human Medicine deserves to be widely read, especially by doctors who can be assured that medical

developments are treated with sufficient seriousness. The starting point in every chapter is a number of pertinent case histories, and the argument is never too abstract. Despite publication in 1973 and the inevitable outdatedness on the occasional detail; for example, when the author refers to the inadequacy of available testing procedures for phenylketonuria in the chapter on 'Genetics and human development', the author's challenge to medical men comes across forcefully. Responsibility in the clinical situation is inadequately discharged unless it is rooted in awareness of a wider, deeper responsibility to God for human values. This is especially well discussed in the chapter on experimentation. Non-medical readers are given surveys of recent developments which are sufficiently informed without being too technical, with the result that the complexity of decision making is kept in view together with the irresponsibility of leaving such matters to the professionals.

Should this interesting and clearly written book be updated and reprinted before the end of the decade (as one must hope), it could be improved in two ways. As to content, modern obstetrical practice needs urgently the sort of evaluation the author has brought to his other subjects. Nowhere is the assumption more easily and questionably made than by obstetricians that what is technically feasible is also in the patient's interests. Then, as to method, Professor Nelson must be criticized for lack of clarity, if not muddle, in his philosophical groundwork of the first chapter. Here he discusses a distinction (admittedly risky and indistinct) between 'human life' and 'personal human life' and the helpfulness of this distinction for deciding the different value to be accorded respectively to a permanently brain-injured, comatose person ('post-personal'), to a mature, normal adult ('person') and to a fetus ('pre-personal'). This notion

of personal human life as waxing and waning in value *may* be empirically validated and so serve as one criterion in decision making and Professor Nelson takes it so. But by 'personal human' he *also* means, and means primarily, that which differentiates human life as being not simply biological but as fundamentally related to and determined by God ('addressed by God'). If *this* is the case it is unclear how *we* are in a position to determine the meaning of 'the fully personal quality of human life' intended by God when it comes, say, to deciding whether or not to turn off the respirator. How the notion of 'personal human life' can inform decision making in a way that is true both to the divine destiny of man and to the observable data of medical science is the ultimate question to which Professor Nelson is rightly pointing us, and this important section could do with more rigorous treatment.

Elsewhere there is plenty of imaginative and balanced ethical argument. One could instance the author's discussion of the morality of transplants on the analogy of the just war; or his useful insistence that it is one thing (medical criteria involved) to determine when death has occurred, quite another (religious, moral judgment involved) to define what one means by death, implying, as that must, that one knows what is meant by life. Other arresting insights include the point that medical issues are not to be solved but coped with, and the suggestion that basically responsibility is to be understood as 'the ability to respond'.

Anyone ready to think and talk seriously and openly about the meaning of medicine and health will be helped by this book. A revised edition in two or three years' time would be a welcome event.

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